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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIJING 024246

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SUBJECT: HANDFUL OF INDEPENDENTS WIN TICKETS TO CHINA'S
DEMOCRATIC THEATER OF THE ABSURD

REF: A. BEIJING 22633

[1](#)B. BEIJING 23629

Classified By: Classified by Political Internal Unit Chief Susan Thornt
on.

Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Although Beijing's popular elections for local people's congresses on November 8 were hailed by the Chinese media as a democratic triumph, they appear to have been a highly orchestrated effort that left little to chance. At a pre-election neighborhood meeting between candidates and prospective voters, and at a polling station on voting day, poloffs found the atmosphere to be festive and local officials eager to explain the elections' "democratic" procedures. In reality, according to several Embassy contacts, most of the races in Beijing were rigged. "Elite shareholders" in the Chinese political system, including Party cadres, local leaders, and wealthy businesspeople, colluded to select the vast majority of "official" candidates and fix election outcomes far in advance. Despite the long odds, however, more than 100 independent candidates managed to run in the election and about 20 independent candidates won seats in Beijing's university areas. In Hubei Province, seven independents won seats. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) On November 8, over eight million Beijing voters reportedly cast ballots to choose more than 14,000 deputies to people's congresses at the district/county and township/town level throughout Beijing municipality. The election was one in a series of local people's congress elections being held nationwide on a rolling basis from now through the end of 2007 (see Ref A). Poloffs observed two events associated with the Beijing elections, a November 4 pre-election meeting between candidates and prospective voters in a western Beijing neighborhood, and voting at a polling station in central Beijing on November 8. Poloffs' participation in both events was organized by the Beijing City Foreign Affairs Office and the Beijing Municipal People's Congress, and included other Western diplomats and a large contingent of foreign journalists.

"Official" Candidates: Controlling Who's on the Ballot

[1](#)3. (C) Despite the fact that both events appeared highly staged, they nevertheless provided an up-close glimpse of the elaborate laws and procedures governing the elections. According to Chinese election law, the Party can directly nominate up to 20 percent of candidates. The rest can be nominated by any group of 10 or more registered voters.

Even though each race must be "competitive," with more candidates than seats at stake, the total number of "official" candidates on the ballot cannot exceed twice the number of seats. The process of winnowing down the list of "official" candidates is the Party's primary means of controlling election outcomes. As the number of candidates initially nominated often far exceeds the maximum, an opaque process of "democratic consultation" is used to reduce the number of candidates and determine which ones will be "official." Officials could not explain precisely how the process works, other than to say it is an iterative process in which a local election committee consults with local groups, eventually settling upon an outcome reflecting the will of the "majority" of residents. The law reportedly allows for a "primary election" to be held if the official candidates cannot be determined via consultation, but this rarely, if ever, occurs.

Voters "Interview" Candidates: Canines, Crime, Clutter

14. (SBU) The November 4 meeting between candidates and voters was highly stylized, but revealed some of the issues on local residents' minds. The meeting was held in western Beijing's Shijingshan District, whose 289,100 registered voters were to choose representatives for the 185-member Shijingshan District People's Congress from among 279 official candidates. In the Beili Neighborhood where the meeting took place, four official candidates were running for three congress seats, with one nominee having been eliminated through "democratic consultation." At the meeting, these candidates introduced themselves and then took questions from the audience of approximately 150 local residents. The candidates included the Beili Neighborhood Party Secretary (who was an incumbent congress deputy and

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formerly worked as an opera singer), a local policeman, the secretary of the local consumers association and an

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elementary school teacher. All but the policeman were Party members.

15. (SBU) Residents asked well-rehearsed questions directed at each of the four candidates in succession, raising concrete issues such as the controversial new Beijing "one-dog policy," as well as concerns over neighborhood security, unpaved streets, the clutter of unregulated advertisements, the quality of local education and efforts to help the unemployed. The only part of the event that didn't run according to script occurred when an elderly man delivered a lengthy rant about rundown areas of the neighborhood and the shortcomings of the district people's congress. After some gentle heckling from discomfited fellow citizens, local staff retrieved the microphone and "restored order" to the meeting.

Election Day: Festive Atmosphere at Polling Station

16. (SBU) On the morning of the November 8 election day, poloffs visited a local polling station in a rundown neighborhood near Beijing Train Station. Local streets were hastily festooned with red lanterns and large banners exhorting citizens to exercise their democratic voting rights. The vast majority of voters were retired, elderly residents, several dressed in Mao suits, who seemed to enjoy the opportunity to greet neighbors and get the latest community gossip. One elderly voter seemed surprised that he actually knew who the candidates were. He seemed to take the process seriously and said he hoped someday Chinese citizens could directly vote for their national leaders. Another, slightly less well-informed voter confessed to poloff that he had no idea who the people on the ballot were and that he came to vote "because he was

told to." Local officials are under pressure to report high turnout numbers for elections and local officials go to great lengths to pressure residents into casting their ballots. For those who refuse to comply, as one source remarked, "they will simply find a way to vote for you."

17. (SBU) Voting procedures appeared fairly straightforward, though voters lacked any semblance of privacy when filling out their ballots. After having their IDs checked against a list of registered voters, residents were handed a ballot listing the official candidates. Voters were required to make a mark next to each candidate's name indicating whether they supported, or opposed, that candidate. The ballot also had space for voters to write in a candidate's name, if none of those on the ballot were acceptable. Staff were on hand to explain voting procedures and to assist the infirm. Most voters filled out their ballots at a table in the center of the room, in full view of all present, including the press. A few used the "secret voting station" consisting of a table behind a screen set up in the corner of the room. Even there, however, privacy was lacking, as curious onlookers poked their heads over voters' shoulders and journalists snapped shots of voters making their decisions. Finally, voters were required to place their completed ballot in the ornate red and gold ballot box in the center of the room.

Propaganda Emphasizes Voter Rights

18. (SBU) Press coverage of the event emphasized China's "democratic" political system in action. At least 10 Chinese journalists and several cameramen tagged along for the small Beili Neighborhood candidates meeting, which was splashed across the front pages of several local papers the next day and billed as a voter "interview" of the candidates. On voting day, national media prominently covered President Hu Jintao and the rest of the Politburo Standing Committee members voting in their respective districts in Beijing. Even former President Jiang Zemin was mentioned as having cast his vote at the Zhongnanhai leadership compound polling station. Meanwhile, ailing Executive Vice Premier Huang Ju, currently in Shanghai, sent a representative to vote for him in Beijing, as is allowed under the election law. Hu Jintao told reporters that the people's congress system is the "foundation" of the country's political system and that his vote enabled him to exercise the democratic rights bestowed upon him by the constitution.

Frustrated Activists Cry Foul

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19. (C) In contrast to the glowing media coverage of the elections, elections activists with whom poloffs spoke were frustrated by official efforts to manipulate outcomes and harass independent candidates, both in Beijing and across China. Elections activist and Director of the World and China Institute Li Fan (strictly protect) told poloff that at the beginning stages of the campaign in Beijing, when voters were allowed to make initial nominations of candidates, "things seemed OK." But, when the final list of candidates came out, the "democratic consultation" process had eliminated most of the independents from the final ballot. The whole process is "just for show," Li complained.

110. (C) Li related several instances of election improprieties in Beijing, as well in Shenzhen and Wuhan, which held their elections earlier this year (Ref A). In one case, a Beijing local election committee reportedly held a meeting to inform local groups that it was rejecting several independent candidates because a "majority" of the district's residents supported government-recommended

candidates. In another instance, a local elections committee merely published its final list of candidates, rejecting all independents, without "consulting" with anyone. Residents' objections were ignored. Li told poloff that, in yet another case, a professor and independent candidate at Beijing Aeronautical University believed that local authorities, having failed to keep him off the ballot, resorted to rigging the vote count to keep him out of the local congress. Li provided poloff with a long list of elections violations documented in Shenzhen and Wuhan, ranging from gerrymandering and voter intimidation to misinformation campaigns designed to confuse voters and harassment of independent candidates.

¶11. (C) Separately, Hubei elections activist Yao Lifa contacted poloff on several occasions to describe the harassment he and other independent candidates endured during the run-up to elections held in Qianjiang City, Hubei Prefecture, that were also held on November 8 (Ref B). Yao and his independent counterparts were running as write-in candidates, having already been left off the ballot. Their only chance of running a successful write-in campaign was to reach a large number of voters directly, through speeches or distribution of campaign materials. In an attempt to disrupt these activities, local police detained Yao and several others, seizing their campaign materials and accusing them of behavior that "disrupted the orderly conduct of elections in accordance with the law."

Independents Win a Handful of Seats

¶12. (C) Despite an apparent concerted effort to prevent independents from running, however, more than 100 independents managed to run in Beijing by going through the official nomination process and getting on the final ballot. In Beijing's residential community areas, no independents were successfully elected, but in the university districts, approximately 20 candidates considered to be independents succeeded in winning seats. Among these, well-known Beijing University law professor Xu Zhiyong kept the seat that he won as an independent in elections three years ago. In Hubei Province, of the sixty independents who mounted campaigns, two won seats on city level people's congresses and five independents were elected to township people's congresses. While these results were disappointing to elections activists, they took some solace from the show of enthusiasm by independents (more than 50,000 candidates were nominated in the initial stage) and the fact that a handful of the races were not completely controlled.

Pre-Cooked Candidate Lists in Shanghai

¶13. (C) The upcoming December 12 people's congress elections in Shanghai provide one of the clearest examples of how elections "really work" in China, Li Fan told poloff. According to Li, Fudan University's election research center has been given permission to monitor preparations for the Shanghai elections. The Fudan teams reportedly have discovered that the final lists of candidates for almost all of the races in the city have already been decided, in secret, by local elites. Senior local Communist Party leaders have allegedly decided they will directly control 15 percent of the seats for themselves and their hand-picked candidates. The other 85 percent of the seats, Li said, were given by the Party to neighborhood "street leaders," who together with other

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local elites and wealthy business representatives, have conspired to determine which official candidates will appear on the ballot on December 12. District-level Party leaders allegedly reserved the right to approve the final candidates list put forward by local leaders.

¶14. (C) Drawing conclusions from the Shanghai example above and other examples of election rigging in China, Li described the situation as one where "elite shareholders," including Party cadres, local leaders, and wealthy businessmen, collude to select in secret the vast majority of candidates and fix the outcome far in advance. In general, that is precisely how China itself is run, Li declared. Li conceded that this represents a slight broadening of interest groups compared to the past, when the Party decided everything by itself. Nevertheless, most of China's "pie" is divided only among this select group and real independent candidates threaten to further divide the "pie" of benefits and disrupt the deals carefully negotiated among elite interest groups behind the scenes. Most worrisome for China's future stability, Li said, is that many of these deals are made entirely within local elites, far beyond the control of the center.

Comment

¶15. (C) Chinese leaders clearly spare little expense and effort on creating the fiction that China's political system is democratic and that its leaders have some, at least indirect, popular support. These efforts are tied to maintaining system legitimacy, an issue that remains at the core of Party concerns. Some political reform activists continue to hold out hope that, in the long term, the people's congresses can play a role in expanding democracy in China, even while current elections are largely manipulated and the congresses themselves toothless. These reformers describe the propagation of democratic consciousness through the voting process, increased pressure to respect citizens' rights and other evidence of nascent democratic institution building as significant, if slow. They maintain that over time, it will be possible to make real institutional changes at the lowest levels of the structure that will then move up gradually. But they also acknowledge that the system might not wait that long.
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